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RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY PRIORITY 1091
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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 1284
RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND PRIORITY 0304
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY PRIORITY 0710
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0287
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000029

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TAGS: PREL MARR PHUM PINR ASEC CASC FJ

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST VIEWS ON FIJI SITUATION;
REQUESTS FOR USG HELP

REF: SUVA 023

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

¶1. (C) A Fiji NGO leader, Angie Heffernan, says colleagues are documenting many reports of military intimidation, including sexual abuse. The NGOs are striving to ensure nobody believes the people of Fiji have acquiesced in the coup. The NGOs believe undercurrents of discontent are bubbling within the ethnic-Fijian community, augmented by Commodore Bainimarama's cabinet selections and policy directions. NGOs hear of pressures building within the military that might cause Bainimarama to give up his PM hat. Heffernan urged foreign governments and the UN to continue support for rule of law and democracy. She provided a proposal for USG assistance, which we will forward once details are in place. Heffernan urged efforts to remove the RFMF from PKO duties and to solidify support for visa bans (particularly by the ROK). She expressed frustration at international HR NGOs and asked for help to orient their attention toward Fiji's plight. End summary.

Intimidation of NGOs and activists

¶2. (C) We spoke on Jan. 12 with Angie Heffernan, Director, Pacific Centre for Public Integrity (PCPI). Heffernan has been one of the most vocal critics of Commodore Bainimarama's coup and the human-rights violations that have followed. She said she has received numerous threats from RFMF sources but has not personally been assaulted. She noted that she has an NCO brother in the RFMF; but she credited PCPI's past interactions with the RFMF, including working together in opposition to Qarase's "reconciliation" bill, for building bridges that so far have protected her. Heffernan was critical, though, of RFMF senior officers Teleni and Driti for their roles in abuse. Heffernan reported that during one of her visits to the military's strategic HQ, Driti threatened in passing: "I'm going to shoot you one of these days." She was not at all certain he was joking.

NGOs role: keep the public from acquiescing

¶3. (C) Heffernan reported that the political-activist NGO community is intent to keep the people of Fiji and the international community from accepting that "everyone has acquiesced" in the coup. A UN-affiliated NGO is preparing a fulsome list of reported abuses, including sexual abuse. Heffernan would like the OHCHR office in Suva to take an

active role, but it has been reluctant to do so. NGOs see a need for UN human rights monitors to be present in Fiji, and Heffernan asked USG help to achieve that.

Situation remains unstable

¶4. (C) Heffernan and her colleagues are convinced the situation remains unstable. The inclusion of three Fiji Labor Party stalwarts (Chaudhry, Bune, and Vayeshnoi) in senior jobs in the interim cabinet and Bainimarama's seeming backing of the FLP's political agenda have undoubtedly stirred concerns in the "nationalist" Fijian community. The NGOs perceive undercurrents of anger that have yet to play out. Heffernan predicts the interim cabinet will split asunder relatively soon. She has pointedly challenged civilian interim ministers to press Bainimarama to call a halt to RFMF human-rights abuses immediately. The NGOs do not want to see an explosion, but they acknowledge one remains possible.

Pressures within the RFMF camp?

¶5. (C) The NGOs are hearing that Bainimarama may give up the PM hat soon, reportedly in order to deal with pressures building within the RFMF leadership. Some officers are frustrated that the interim government line-up, including Bainimarama's PM role, is "not what they had been promised." Heffernan suggested one split is between "policy" people like Bainimarama and Teleni and "the thugs" at the operational headquarters like Driti.

Pressures on the Chairman, GCC

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¶6. (C) Heffernan noted a "360 degree turnaround" in the views of Great Council of Chiefs Chairman Bokini, from opposing the illegal coup to endorsing the interim administration this week. The NGOs have been told a motivation was threats from the RFMF related to an investigation into business practices of the Tavua Provincial Council. Supposedly, evidence has arisen that Bokini took as his own several boats purchased by the Council for the broader Fijian community.

Foreign support hugely important: UN PKO; ROK visa ban

¶7. (C) Heffernan stressed that continuing expressions of support from foreign governments like Australia, New Zealand, and the United States are hugely important to help keep people in Fiji from acquiescing. We shared Washington's most recent statement (State 2259). Heffernan had seen it and expressed appreciation. She raised Fiji's participation in UN PKO as a potentially powerful lever, saying PCPI and NGO colleagues are attempting to raise the issue with the UN, given new Secretary General Ban's encouraging public reiteration of UN concern about Fiji. She noted that New Zealand's Nationalist Party has endorsed bringing RFMF troops back from PKO assignments, and she asked for USG support. We noted the multiple U.S. equities involved in that issue and did not give her hope. She noted that South Korea appears to be the only destination from Fiji that has yet to impose visa sanctions, and she urged the U.S. to seek Seoul's assistance.

Trouble engaging international HR NGOs; request for help

¶8. (U) Heffernan complained that local NGO efforts, including her own, to direct the attention of international human-rights NGOs to post-coup abuses in Fiji seem not to have resonated at all. Amnesty International's Australia office has never returned calls. Human Rights Watch and others have shown no interest yet. Heffernan asked if the State Department could assist. We expressed surprise at the lack of response and promised to flag that issue to DRL.

Possible request for PD funding; details to follow

¶9. (U) Per e-mail exchanges with EAP/ANP and EAP/PD, we had sought Heffernan's ideas for possible near-term PD funding to help promote democratic values in Fiji. She provided a rough proposal centered around utilizing commercial radio (the primary media news source in rural areas) to undertake democracy and rule of law education in the villages via a talk-back format. She is to provide more detail and a proposed budget ASAP.

Comment

¶10. (C) Heffernan has been a brave defender of human-rights values during the coup period, and at the moment she is one of the few still willing to speak up. She says others will rejoin the fray shortly, and we hope that is the case. Most every plugged-in person we talk to believes anger is still reverberating within the ethnic-Fijian community. Nobody, though, seems confident of how that frustration will manifest itself, if at all. We want to encourage stalwart NGOs to keep advocating core "democracy" and "rule of law" values in Fiji, so we intend to continue a dialogue and to seek out ways in which modest amounts of USG funding might usefully assist.

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